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ABSTRACT

A pilot study was conducted with three 8th grade boy and three 8th grade girls to understand their interpretation of the existence of peer groups and their belonging to a specific peer group. The study also attempted to determine whether boys and girls differ in their perceptions of social relationships in school. A literature review was conducted on feminist literature about the relational psychology of adolescent girls; masculinity and boys' peer culture; gender differences in adolescent peer friendship; and adolescent interpersonal competencies as described in developmental psychology. From cross-case conclusions, boys and girls clearly demonstrated different patterns in their perceptions of peer relationships in groups. As for the meaning of being in a peer group, boys and girls differed in that the girls were more concerned about fitting into the group. Both the literature review and pilot study suggested that adolescent boys and girls have different perceptions of peer groups. Boys stated that the group is what they do together. For girls, it is whether they are popular or well-liked. Girls feel more connected and dependent on groups. The importance of qualitative research was stressed in order to help adolescents who have problems with the meaning of peer groups in their lives. (Contains 51 references.) (JDM)

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Meaning of the Group: diverging perspectives of the early adolescent boys and girls on their peer groups.

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Introduction

Everyone who has ever observed adolescents at school knows that adolescent boys and girls often function in groups. It is also known that from kindergarten through the 8th–9th grade, peer groups at school are mostly 'only girls' or 'only boys' groups (Maccoby, 1998). Yet the phenomena of segregation of children into the same–sex groups and differences in their interaction styles are still not well understood and needs further exploration. What is also not studied well is how children, and particularly adolescents, make sense of the peer groups within their school. What is the meaning of the existence of different peer groups and of their own belonging to specific groups for adolescents ? Are boys' and girls' perceptions of social relationships in peer groups different? These questions are the driving force of my work.

To search for the answers, I conducted a pilot study of three 8th grade boys and three 8th grade girls, interviewed about their peer relationships in school, as well as a literature review on the subject.

I conducted a selective literature review of four established bodies of knowledge: the feminist literature about relational psychology of adolescent girls, the studies of masculinity regarding adolescent boys' peer culture, the literature on gender differences in adolescent peer friendships, and the developmental psychology literature about adolescent interpersonal competencies. Integrating my knowledge from these four areas creates a theoretical base to inform the pilot study and helps me in the analyses of the interviews.

Part I. The literature review

Feminist literature addressing adolescent girls' peer relationships

In examination of the feminist literature my leading question was 'how do adolescent girls perceive social relationships in a peer group?' I focused on the literature of feminist scholars who were specifically interested in adolescent girls' relationships and development. A distinguishing feature of feminist studies is that women studying adolescent girls often take an anthropological, grounded theory approach, building theory from the data (versus testing hypotheses), and bring adolescent girls' voices into their publications (Way, 1996; Rogers, 1993). Presenting their data, feminist writers stay in connection with the data and consider thoroughly every spoken and unspoken word of girls talking about relationships. In their works, feminist scholars also reflect on their own reactions to the data, such as adolescent memories and vulnerabilities of the researcher, and consider the research process itself as a way to connect with the girls as well as with their own (researchers') womanhood (Gilligan, Lyons, Hanmer, 1990 ; Rogers, 1993). A new voice–centered method of psychological research was developed by the feminist school, which sees research as an inherently relational process and considers the narrative in an interview or the responses in a survey as jointly constructed by the participant and the psychologist (Brown& Gilligan, 1992; Way, 1996).

Researchers note that girls often find their friends before they share common interests. The girls' friendship choices are often based on factors such as appearance, specific ability, class and ethnicity. Shared interests may be developed later, after an initial link has been established (Griffits, 1995, p.32). As Nielsen and Rudberg note: "For the girls, it seems, a relationship is the prerequisite of common activity, whilst the

opposite is the case for the boys: for them joint activity is a way of establishing relationships" (Nielsen and Rudberg, 1992, p.8). The other important feature of adolescent girls' same-sex friendships is the development of small cliques of friends with an intense dynamic of inclusion and exclusion regulating relationships. An adolescent girl seems to always want to belong to some group, yet she would also like to feel independent of the group and regulate the relationships by herself. As Griffits describes this struggle for adolescent girls, " There seems to be a tension between a fear of being rejected or left alone, and a need to retain a certain degree of independence and control within relationships" (Griffits, 1995, p.180). This author also cites the work of S. Aapola (1992) who sees the balancing of closeness and independence as the central tension in adolescent girls' friendships. Thus, we know that adolescent girls seek friends even before they have common interests, and when girlfriends find each other they maintain small groups within which girls experience a tension between belonging to the group and keeping one's own individuality. When girls quarrel or exclude a friend from their group it is often a betrayal of trust between close friends that is mentioned as either a reason for 'falling out' or manifestation of a quarrel (Griffits, 1995; Way, 1996). What is also important about adolescent girls' friendships is that these relationships often are very emotionally intense. As Griffits points: "what struck me forcibly in reading through the interviews and field notes is the intensity of emotion which falling out, be it 'tiff taff' or more serious could occasion"(p.180).

There are also other findings regarding the common features of girls' same-sex friendships, such as girls' closeness, intimacy and disclosure of their vulnerabilities in their relationships. (Maccoby, 1998). Yet, we can already see from the studies cited above that being in relationships with peers seem to be extremely important for

adolescent girls. Also we see that these relationships are very intense and create the psychological tension for girls between belonging to a peer group and keeping one's individuality, which in turn means that the adolescent girls often become immersed in the relationships to the degree of feeling their self violated.

Indeed, one of the most powerful discoveries of feminist scholars is the relational crisis of adolescence. In pioneering work, Gilligan claims that developing in patriarchal culture adolescent girls have to "lose their voice for the sake of relationships" (Gilligan, 1982). This process has been described as a crisis, in which a developing young woman takes on the social norms of goodness, passivity and niceness dictated by patriarchal culture. " The girl coming of age in a culture in which the conventions are not the same for women and men faces a deeply knotted dilemma of how to listen both to herself and to the tradition" (Gilligan, Rogers & Brown, 1990). This dilemma creates a psychological tension, the resolution of which often comes as girl's dissociation from her authentic, 'natural' voice. An adolescent girl "forgets" her unique knowledge and experience of herself and of the relationships and, conforming to the feminine norms of 'niceness' in relationships, covers her true feelings with not knowing, politeness and a willingness to please the other. Gilligan believes the girls not only do lose their voice for the sake of their relationships, but also lose the relationships that they 'save', because the girls are not present in these relationships (Gilligan, 1996). In a longitudinal study of mostly white middle class girls in a private school Brown and her colleagues observed the development of this relational crises from childhood through adolescence: " seven and eight year old girls interrupt the surface calm and quiet of daily life with their insistence on saying what is happening between people...[they have] simple straightforward relational desire to speak and to be listened to" (Brown, 1992, p.44). Later, the "11–12

year olds describe the difference between what they know from experience and what others say is or should be happening"(ibid. p.105). And, finally "Adolescence marks a potential point of departure from life experience....girls risk losing touch with the specific– with their bodies, with their feelings, with their relationships...consequently girls becoming young women are in danger of losing their ability to know the difference between true and false relationships" (ibid., p.214). The more recent studies also documented adolescence as a period of crises for girls of color and for girls from lower economic classes (Taylor, Gilligan, & Sullivan, 1995).

Another description of girls in adolescence losing their ability to be courageous and "speak one's mind by telling all one's heart" we find in Rogers' work with teenage girls. In her work, Rogers argues that to sustain a girl's ability to speak her mind and not lose her voice, a girl needs to transgress the conventions of feminine goodness and resist the status quo of our society (Rogers, 1993).

Pipher (1994) takes this further and states that "One way to think about all the pain and pathology of adolescence is to say that the culture is just too hard for most girls to understand and master at this point in their development"(Pipher, 1994).

Thus, the studies cited above suggest that adolescent girls in peer relationships, in the context of our patriarchal culture, often tend to lose their own voices and courage. In these and other relationships girls become feminine, silent and caring and believing in the voices of others more than their own experiences.

Another important discovery of feminist scholars in the last two decades of studies is that girl's sense of self is different from the one traditionally described by male psychologists. Feminist writers strongly oppose the idea of development as a set of separations from the early relationships and from the family, as suggested by Freud,

Erikson, Blos and many others, and insist that at least for women this model of development does not work (Miller, 1991; Surrey, 1991; Kaplan et all, 1991). According to this school of thought, " the direction of growth is not toward greater degrees of autonomy or individuation and the breaking of early emotional ties, but toward a process of growth within relationships, where all people involved are encouraged and challenged to maintain connection and to foster, adapt to, and change with the growth of the other"(Surrey, 1991, p.54). This idea is supported by Stern in her qualitative study of adolescent girls. She found that girls do not dichotomize separation and connection in relationships. For them "separation involves a redefined ability to respond to (and consequently to connect with) the other"(Stern, 1990). Thus, feminist relational psychologists see women generally, and adolescent girls in particular, as continuously developing in the context of relationships. Moreover, these researchers consider relationships to be so important in women's development that they enter the very construct of woman's self. A new concept of self–in–relationship is introduced by this theory, which implies that woman's sense of self is by definition relational. Unlike boys, who presumably separate from their parents in the oedipal years, and due to the better emotional understanding of girls with their mothers in later childhood (Surrey, 1991, Miller, 1991), girls grow up in continuous connection with their mothers and become a 'being –in– relation'. Consequently, at adolescence "Girls are not seeking the kind of identity that has been prescribed for boys, but a different kind, one in which one is a 'being–in relation', which means developing all of one's self in increasingly complex ways, in increasingly complex relationships"(Miller, 1991, p.21). Within the relational theory adolescence is considered an important period in the growth of women's core relational self–structure. According to Kaplan, Gleason and Klein (1991), the many

planes along which this growth occurs include: 1) an increased potential for mutual empathy, 2) relational flexibility, or the capacity to permit relationships to evolve, 3) an ability and willingness to work through relational conflict while continuing to value the core of emotional connection, 4) the capacity to feel more empowered as a result of one's inner sense of relational connection to others. Thus, for adolescent girls the relationships with peers are not just important, but critical for the healthy sense of self, into which these relationships are subsumed.

It is important to note here one aspect in which the feminist relational school may be questionable. This is an explanation of all of the adolescent girls' relational styles with the inequities of patriarchal culture and paying less attention to the biological components in human development. For example, it could have been considered that the relational turmoil of women's adolescence comes not only from a struggle with the patriarchy, but also from a natural course of physiological and socio–cognitive development of a woman.

Yet the contribution of feminist authors into our understanding of adolescent girls should not be underestimated and their major discoveries of relational crises of adolescence and female relational self should be seriously considered in any study of adolescent peer relationships.

Masculinist studies with regard to adolescent boys' relationships

Now let's turn to the studies that focus specifically on boys' and men's psychology of relationships and the development of masculinity. The researchers often report that one of the major features of adolescent boys' same–sex peer relationships is the competitive nature of these relationships. Askew and Ross, who observed groups in

their ethnographic study of adolescent boys in schools of Britain, state "We observed a 'continuous power play' underlying most interactions between boys, an ongoing process of positioning and a continual seeking of status and prestige....this (competitive interaction) could relate to their work, skill, dress, behavior or activities, feats or fights outside the classroom. Boys seemed to be constantly attempting to impress each other" (Askew, Ross, p.34, 1988). The way adolescent boys try to impress each other is usually pretending to be 'tough' in whatever meaning their concrete peer culture has ascribed to this word. Gilbert and Gilbert, who also observed adolescent boys in classrooms conclude, " toughness seems to characterize much of the boys' approach to the world and to relation with others... Toughness is both a means to the end, in its contribution to the school success and group popularity, but also an end in itself as a part of their developing masculinity"(Gilbert & Gilbert, p.142, 1998). These authors cite the research of Mac.An Ghail (1976) who classified three typical groups of boys in high school –'macho lads', 'academic achievers' and 'new enterprisers'. They suggest that the nature of competition and idea of 'toughness' may vary within different boys' subcultures, yet the cult of 'toughness' is always present in boys' relationships (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998). Complimentary to the observations of adolescent boys' competitive friendships is the finding that in these relationships boys often find it hard to trust other boys and to connect with them. Using the feminist voice–centered method Way conducted a longitudinal study of 19 urban, ethnically diverse adolescent boys. The method implies specific analyses of the interviews with separate listening for the plot, for the voice of the 'I' and for the ways in which people talk about relationships (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Way found that "As these adolescent boys grow older, they grow increasingly distrustful of their male peers. Furthermore, by their latter–year interviews the boys spoke about not

having close male friends because they did not trust their male peers. Many of the boys, however, yearned for close male friendships and recalled having had such friendships at an earlier age" (Way, p.703, 1997). This finding is also supported by classroom observations that adolescent boys in their communications seemed very distrustful, and "overwhelmingly unwilling to say things in front of each other which were personal or left them at all vulnerable"(Askew, Ross, p.36, 1988). Thus, from the integration of these empirical studies, one can conclude that in relationships with their same–sex peers, adolescent boys are competitive, constantly try to be 'tougher' and better than others, do not trust their friends and often feel unable to be close with each other. Yet, they seem to yearn for more intimate friendships.

However, as Barr (1990) has noted in his work, the relationship between intimacy and competition in boys' friendships is rarely studied directly. Through the review of literature on this subject he concludes that more research is needed to learn the positive role of competitiveness in boys' friendships. The support to this idea comes particularly from the works of S. Swain (1989), who suggests that competing males often express a kind of covert intimacy in their relationships. Also, in more recent work Pollack claims that " the name–calling, insults, and physical rough–housing are part of the way they (boys) express their feelings for one another– in 'action mode'. I see affection underneath the physicality....boys won't usually walk arm by arm or say 'I love you', but they have found compensatory strategies that work for them and are understood by them"(Pollack, p.196, 1999). Pollack also claims that competition among boys is generally less about one boy triumphing over the other and more about engaging in a mutual challenge. Boys seem to enjoy asserting themselves with other boys, and they like feeling competent at the activities in which other boys are participating (Pollack, 1999).

Thus, even though boys may often feel vulnerable in competitive contexts, it does not necessarily mean that boys always suffer from a lack of intimate connection in these relationships. It seems more likely that their ways of connecting in the context of competition are just more emotionally inhibited and less straightforward than girls' and women' expressions of friendships.

Theorists of masculinity attempt to explain the behaviors observed in the groups of adolescent boys. Following the traditions of feminist school, students of masculinity emphasize the shaping role of patriarchal society in development. The masculinist studies consider the cultural ideal of 'boy code' (Pollack, 1999) a major negative influence on boys' selves. A 'boy code' prescribes men to be stoic, independent, take risks, achieve status and power and avoid emotional expressions of dependence, warmth and empathy (Pollack, 1999). Many researchers believe that raised to follow the 'boy code', adolescent boys as well as older men are often separated from their emotional selves, are not sure about their own feelings and indeed have difficulties finding emotional contact with the other males (Seidler, 1997, Pollack, 1999, Kindlon and Thompson, 1999, Messner, 1990). According to this school of thought, "boys are often encouraged to be independent and self–sufficient from an early age, they learn to separate from their inner emotional lives...emotions become a sign of dependency and reflect a lack of self–control which is particularly threatening to the notions of male identity." (Seidler, p.107, 1997) Boys learn to hide their vulnerabilities and hurt behind the mask of masculinity. As Kindlon and Thompson describe, adolescent boys hide their hurt because to admit it appears weak, and look to make preemptive strikes when possible–to divert attention from themselves and onto others (Kindlon, Thompson, 1998). This behavior certainly contributes to the boys' culture of teasing each other.

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The students of masculinity suggest that in a patriarchal culture, similar to adolescent girls who have to hide their knowing, active voices behind the mask of 'niceness' and 'not knowing' in relationships, adolescent boys lose their true emotional selves behind the 'macho' mask of all–knowing bravado and invulnerability. Yet, some authors seem to suggest that the crises for boys is even more dangerous, because the boys learn to detach from their feelings completely to the degree that they feel only what they are "supposed to feel " (V.Seidler, 1998).

Thus, theorists of masculinity offer explanations to several relational behaviors of boys. Boys' not expressing direct verbal empathy and care in their relationships is explained by the 'boy code' which does not allow them to do so (Pollack, 1999). The teasing culture of boys' friendships is explained as, the boys are afraid of being hurt with not having possibility to express it, and they try to divert attention from themselves onto the others (Kindlon, Thomson, 1998). Also, boys' yearning for closer relationships which they can not enter, is explained by that, even culturally inhibited by 'boy code', boys are emotional (Pollack, 1999, Kindlon, Thompson, 1998, Seidler, 1997). What this approach does not explain though, is why adolescent boys enjoy competing with their friends and indeed like an atmosphere of challenge. Redirecting attention onto others to protect one's inner world does not seem a solid explanation for boys' deriving real pleasure from the competitive games with their peers. Also, it is noticeable that theorists of masculinity, like feminist school, tend to explain most of the boys' relational development with the influence of patriarchal stereotype of the man and underemphasize the role biology can play in the formation of the masculine culture of relationships. As an alternative example, one could consider that boys engage in competitive relationships

with their peers also as a result of natural course of psycho–physiological development of a man.

Gender differences literature.

Studying gender differences in adolescent peer relationships I found two types of literature. The first type is empirical comparative studies of same–sex friendships of boys and girls, most been published from 1975 through the 80s.These studies utilized quantitative methods to analyze questionnaires completed by adolescents. The second group of articles are more current theoretical works of researchers of gender who attempt to integrate the data gathered by earlier research and conceptualize known differences between the boys' and girls' peer cultures in general terms. I will consider these two groups of studies separately.

Summarizing generations of empirical research on gender differences, Maccoby (1998) suggests that there are three basic phenomena in boys' and girls' peer behavior: the segregation of boys and girls into same–sex groups, the differentiation of interaction styles, and the difference in sizes of these groups (p.77). From Maccoby's point of view, adolescence marks the time when the same–sex segregation comes to an end, and boys and girls learn to communicate with each other. Yet their communication, as well as later cross–sex communication of adults in many domains, are often still influenced by the styles they learned in the same–sex peer cultures of childhood. Boys tend to be more assertive and active, girls tend to be more empathic and avoid confrontation (Maccoby, 1998). Indeed, many studies researching the same–sex relationships of early adolescents confirm this view of gender differences in peer relationships. Girls are consistently found to view their relationships as more intimate and close, and ascribe more importance to this closeness than do boys (Moore & Boldero, 1991). At the same time, girls in their friendships tend to avoid teasing and conflict in general (Thorne & Luria, 1986, Tannen, 1990). Young males reported sharing activities more frequently than females, where

females more frequently shared their feelings or perceptions of themselves and others (Caldwell &Peplau, 1982). Boys also more frequently than girls identify behaviors such as teasing, bossiness and quarreling as a normal positive expressions of friendships (Bank, 1984). Finally, adolescent girls and boys are often well aware of their relational differences and hold different beliefs about girls' friendships relative to boys' friendships (Bukowsky & Kramer, 1986). Aside from adolescent boys and girls having different styles of relationships in same–sex groups, it seems that for girls their peer relationships are more important. Supporting the finding of feminist school that relationships are critical for girls' sense of self, the research on adolescent depression suggests that with the same amount of social stress in peer relationships girls become more depressed and report lower self–esteem than boys do (Moran &Eckenrode, 1989). The same authors also found that in contrast, social support of the peer group is correlated with lower depression scores and higher self–esteem scores for boys to a greater extent than for girls. These results clearly indicate that social support and social stress caused by the peer group have a different impact on the mental health of adolescent boys and girls. Girls are more likely to be depressed because of unfortunate peer relationships and are less easily then boys to get out of depression even when peer support is present.

Interestingly, one of the most important components of peer relationships for girls seems to be their popularity among the peers. Researchers found that adolescent girls are more concerned with popularity than are adolescent boys (Eder & Hallinan,1978). Also, there is a stronger association between low popularity and symptoms of depression for adolescent girls than for adolescent boys (Oldenbur& Kerns, 1997). Describing the subgroups emerging in adolescent peer groups, E. Maccoby also notes that "Boys with mutual interests in computers, or athletics, form subgroups, and these groupings are

recognized by other children and given names– the "jocks", the "nerds', the "brains". Among girls such groupings are not so clear. The main basis for distinction among girls appears to be popularity" (Maccoby, p.57, 1998). She also states that, when puberty approaches, those girls who are viewed by other girls as popular with boys become the most popular within the girls' groups. One of the interesting and important directions for the future research of adolescent peer relationships is to explore further the causal or other connections between these two kinds of girls' popularity.

There are several theoretical works in the area, which attempt to integrate the accumulated knowledge about different relational cultures of boys and girls and explain the differences. One of them is the influential book of Tannen 'You just don't understand' where the author suggests that men and women of all ages differ in styles of communication, with women focusing more on intimacy and men focusing more on independence (Tannen, 1990). She further claims that intimacy and independence dovetail with connection and status, in relationships men care more about their status and women about staying connected. Since the essential element of status is asymmetry, Tannen suggests that men tend to perceive other people in terms of hierarchy, (e.g. others as higher or lower in status then themselves) while women tend more to perceive others as equal to them. As a result, she suggests that women's strategy in friendly relationships is to feel together, keep intimate connection and create the sense of community. For men, she suggests the strategy in friendship is not to let the friend down, respect his independence and keep the status equal. To exemplify her theory, Tannen considered communication between dyads of adolescent boys and girls in 10th grade. The pairs of girls talked at length about one girl's problems. The other girl pressed her to elaborate, and said 'I know' and gave supporting evidence. In contrast, the 10th grade boys tend not

to concentrate on troubles of one friend. Instead, each boy talks about his own troubles, seemingly dismissing the other's problem as insignificant. Yet according to Tannen, the strategy behind this behavior is not to let the friend feel down and lower than oneself. Thus, the general explanation of Tannen of different relational cultures of girls and boys is their different concerns in relationships with connection or status correspondingly.

Bennenson in her study (1996) suggests a reinterpretation of Tannen's work. She believes that " in their relationships, many females relative to males are concerned with maximizing mutual empathy and many males relative to females are concerned with maximizing assertiveness" (Bennenson, p.278, 1996). The author further claims that it is not true that males are less concerned with connection and that women don't care about their status, she suggests that just the content of these categories is different for men and women– women connect through empathy and men connect through assertiveness. In this perspective, Bennenson can be supported by some of the students of masculinity, like Pollack, who also believes that assertiveness and competition for men is the mode of connection. The hierarchies for women, Bennenson suggests, are based on ability to soothe others, and also exist in form of achieving superiority in responding to one's own and other's emotional distress.

More research is needed to find out which of the two perspectives is more accurate. What seems to be clear though, is that the styles of relating with the peers for adolescent boys and girls are indeed different. Maccoby suggests that the differences in relational cultures of the sexes are most revealing in the same–sex groups. (Maccoby, 1998). Boys and girls may not differ that much as individuals, since gender differences are hardly found in studies of personality traits. Yet it is the very context of boys' and girls' peer groups that shapes their relational styles in distinct male or female ways.

Maccoby believes that the peer groups themselves become the major source of the gender identity formation. Basically, this claim is a suggestion that gender is a collective phenomenon, a collective culture of behavior emerging in biological same–sex groups. In response to her critics, who say that Maccoby considers distinctive cultures of boys and girls, as if they self–emerge independent of the patriarchal culture, she says: " Boys and girls acquire the same knowledge about stereotypes, but they adopt different elements from what they have seen. Adoption follows upon the formation of a strong gender identity. Although we cannot doubt the effect of sexist cultures, we must take seriously the role of children's same–sex social groups in forging the gender identities that make children susceptible to these social messages"(Maccoby, p.538, 1991). Overall, in comparison to the feminist school and the students of masculinity who consider patriarchal culture the major influence on female or male relational behavior, the researchers of gender differences in relationships pay more respect to the studies of sex hormones and behavior, and the works of evolutionary biologists. For example, Bennenson reviewing several studies concludes that " There is evidence that sex hormones influence children's and adult's involvement in assertive versus empathic interactions"(Benenson, p.282, 1996). Similarly, Maccoby admits, "There is some good evidence that our evolutionary history has equipped children of the two sexes with predispositions to engage in somewhat different forms of play."(Maccoby, p.117, 1998).

Accepting the fact that male and female styles of relating begin to shape very early within the same–sex cultures, one should seriously consider the possibility of two genders having inherently different perceptions of the social world. The hypothesis seems plausible especially in light of modern cognitive studies, which reveal sex differences in verbal and spatial abilities (women being superior in the first and men in

the second domains respectively) and even in the very structures of the human brain (Halpern, 1992). If we are to take aside the political implications of these findings and honestly accept them as a scientific discovery, we should also think of possible gender differences in the cognitive perceptions of social relationships. Also, if the secret of male or female style of relating indeed lies in interaction between the same–sex peers, it is very important to study these interactions in detail. We need to understand how children construct their relationships and what differences between boys and girls' ways of perceiving of and interacting with the other exist.

Developmental studies of adolescent relationships

In this section I focus on the adolescent perceptions of peer relationships from the point of view of developmental research. Many constructive–developmental theories agree in seeing adolescence as a time of mental transition from the stage of cognitive ability to understand one's own as well as the other's perspective to the stage of taking the third person's perspective on the interactions and forming commitments to the relationships. (Kohlberg, 1984, Kegan, 1982, Selman, 1980) At this time an increasing awareness of adolescent's own needs and emerging beliefs, and an increasing understanding of the other, shapes a new ability to understand the chemistry of relationships between people, and consciously control the relationships.

> The third–person perspective of this level allows the adolescent to step outside an interpersonal interaction or relationship abstractly and to mutually coordinate and consider the perspectives and interactions of self and other(s). When individuals use this level of understanding they can begin to see the logic of coordination of reciprocal perspectives and hence establish a basis for the belief that satisfaction, security, understanding, and resolution must be mutual and coordinated to be genuine and effective. (Selman & Schultz, 1990, p.14)

What do these cognitive developmental changes mean for the actual structures of the early adolescent peer relationships? The developmental studies of adolescent dyadic friendships suggest that the developing concerns and needs of early adolescents dictate the new social provisions and relational features that are sought in friendships. Friendships move outside of confines of the classroom and school playground, become more 'talk focused' than 'play focused' (Smollar &Youniss, 1982), requiring from adolescents the skill of initiating and sustaining interesting conversations. Relationships with peer friends become a forum for self–exploration and a source of emotional support for adolescents (Harter, 1990), requiring that teenagers learn to appropriately self–

disclose personal thoughts and be able to provide empathic emotional support to friends. At the same time the more frequent situations of disagreement and conflict that emerge in friendships due to more contact time and more mutual dependence between the friends require teenagers to be able to manage conflicts in ways that effectively reduce tension and maintain intimacy of the relationship (Buhrmester, 1996).

It is also important to note that in adolescence the relationships with peers take a new, quasi–parental function. As Savin–Williams and Berndt suggest, intimate relations with friends become more important and increasingly more important than connections with the parents. While most adolescents still keep emotional and other contacts with their family, they are far more likely to be self–disclosing and open, to 'tell everything' about the self to friends than to parents. In addition, the frequency of interactions with friends continues to increase throughout adolescence as time spent with parents decreases (Savin–Williams& Berndt, 1990).

The development of interpersonal competencies also leads an adolescent to the new understanding of his/her larger peer group context. Reviewing the recent studies on adolescent peer groups, Brown notes that "In a fashion similar to Erikson's depiction of late adolescents seeking an "occupational niche" to help consummate identity development, one can speak of a teenager's need to locate her or his "peer group niche" – a position among peers that is uniquely one's own but that fits into the larger fabric of peer social life" (Brown, p.182, 1990). He also states that the developmental transformations in teenager's concepts of peer groups and crowds are reminiscent of the sequence of developmental changes in social–cognitive skills. In Brown's opinion, early adolescents seem to focus on concrete behavioral components of the peer group system. They can readily identify the membership of major cliques among classmates, but they

have a more primitive understanding of the crowds. In one study, sixth–graders who were asked to name and describe the major crowds in their school gave labels that focused on group leaders or recess activities: Aimee's group, "jump rope"crowd, "play kill" crowd. By contrast, most students in eighth and ninth grade labeled crowds by their general dispositions or interests: "jocks", "nerds", and so on (Brown, 1990). In the same work the author discusses two other interesting developmental changes in adolescent perceptions:

> Along with the changing conceptualization of crowds, there are shifts in students' assessments of the salience of crowd membership. Both J. Coleman (39) and, more recently, Brown, Eicher, & Petrie (21) found a steady decline in adolescents' ratings of the importance of belonging to a crowd and a mounting concern with age about the ways in which remaining close to a crowd stifles self–expression and identity development (Brown, p.189, 1990).

Thus, the importance of peer relationships in adolescence and the perceptions of peer influence vary with psychosocial development of an adolescent. At the same time, there is some evidence for the perceptions of the peer pressure being correlated with gender. For example, Aapola (1992), sees the balancing of closeness and independence in a peer group as a central tension in girls' friendships, while it is not clear whether this tension is also strong in adolescent boys' relations. The other studies of peer pressure suggest that girls are slightly more susceptible than boys to implicit peer pressure from a general set of peers, whereas boys are more susceptible than girls to explicit pressure from friends, and especially in antisocial situations (Brown, 1990).

These findings need further interpretation. They imply that adolescent boys and girls experience peer pressure and feel the influence of their peers in different manners. What is not clear, though, is the relationship between gender and psychosocial development in their contribution to boys' and girls' perceptions of peer influences.

Unfortunately, research bringing together the stages of socio–cognitive development and studies of gender in relationships rarely can be found. The two great areas of psychology seem to be completely unintegrated and foreign to each other.

My search of developmental studies of the adolescent peer relationships also lead me to conclude that more research is needed that would focus directly on adolescent perceptions. While many empirical studies were done to quantitatively measure different aspects of peer relationships, very few studies were designed to capture the very experiences and perceptions of adolescents from their own words. Researchers were most often statistically testing their own hypotheses regarding adolescent friendships, rather than exploring qualitatively in depth the relational worlds of adolescent boys and girls. Furman (1996), in his review of current approaches to the measurement of children's perceptions in friendship, considers several questionnaires and inventories that were developed and applied in last two decades. A few include: Berndt's Assessment of Friendship Features (1992); Boivin and Hoza's (1994) Friendship Qualities Scale; Parker and Ascher's (1993) Friendship Quality Questionnaire; Furman and Adler's (1982) Friendship Questionnaire. Discussing validity and psychometric properties of various quantitative tools he comes to the conclusion that the "Comparisons among different instruments are badly needed...If particular scales are not highly related to other measures, they may either have some measurement problems or they may be tapping some distinct feature of friendship perceptions" (Furman, p.56, 1996). What this author does not mention, though, is what seems to be a lack of in–depth qualitative research in the area. How can we paint a real picture of the complex adolescents' relationships, if boys' and girls' perceptions of relationships are usually tapped by formal questionnaires built on 5–point Likert scale (1–strongly agree, 5–strongly disagree)?

Conclusion

While contemporary research reveals consistent differences in the ways boys and girls understand and construct their peer relationships, the differences between genders remain uncharted on the conceptual maps of human development. The basic stages of cognitive and social development are still considered to be the same for both genders. The three decades of feminist research, recent studies of masculinity, the studies of gender differences in relationships and even the works of developmental psychologists revealing the differences between the genders are still not integrated within the major theories of human development. There is a strong need in more theoretical and empirical research in this direction, which would bring together our knowledge of socio–cognitive development and of gender cultures in adolescent relationship. The exemplary studies attempting to bring together developmental theory and gender were started in the seventies, particularly in the research on women's identity. It has been suggested that the order of the stages postulated by Erikson (1968) is different for males and females. While for men identity formation precedes the stage of intimacy, it was argued, that for women the scenario could be reverse (Douvan &Adelson, 1966, Harter, 1990). Other findings have suggested that the actual experience of the identity crises is different for women and men (Marcia&Friedman, 1970, Toder& Marcia 1973). Today similar research is needed that would include the different constructions of the peer relationships by girls and boys into an exploration of the social and cognitive development of adolescents.

Part II. Pilot study

The review of the literature conducted above led me to conclude that more research is needed for a better understanding of gender differences in adolescent peer relationships. It seems to me that it is particularly important to conduct qualitative research on how adolescents themselves make meaning of their peer relationships in the context of same–sex peer groups. Thus, I conducted a pilot study, which explores primary themes for research in this direction.

The study is designed to address the following set of questions: Within my sample, is there a difference between how early adolescent girls and boys define peer groups in their grade? Is there a difference between what belonging to a peer group means for a girl and what it means for a boy? Are girls and boys different in how they experience peer influence?

The questions I am posing here were touched upon in the interviews with 8th graders, conducted as a part of the project "Improving Intergroup Relations among Youth". Supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, this project demonstrated the efficacy of the Facing History and Ourselves (FHAO) program in promoting interpersonal and intergroup relations among adolescents. The study was conducted by the FHAO, a national non–profit teacher development organization, in collaboration with The Group for the Study of Interpersonal Development of Harvard University. In 1996, FHAO research team conducted the interviews with 8th graders of different ethnic and socio–economic backgrounds in one of the public schools in Massachusetts[1]. Each student in the sample was interviewed twice, both before and after the Facing History school course. One of the objectives of these interviews was to study how students talk

[1] I am very grateful to the administration of the project and to principal investigator Dennis Barr who allowed me as a member of the research team to use these data.

about peer groups that exist in their class. Students were asked direct questions about relationships between and within these groups and about their own belonging to specific groups.

Three boys' and three girls' interviews from the FHAO study constitute the data, upon which I conduct comparative analyses. Some of the data were previously analyzed in the project (FHAO final report, 1998), yet the focus of the analyses has not been on gender differences in perceptions of the peer groups. While being a limited sample of convenience, these interviews provide important evidence to illuminate my research questions and allow for initial understanding of different themes portrayed by boys and girls.

As a tool for thematic comparison I use the categories of The Risk and Relationship Framework (Selman and Shultz, 1990), which proved helpful for understanding the development of interpersonal competencies. In this study I explore how adolescents *understand* their peer relationships. I use the term "understanding" as suggested in Selman, Levitt and Shultz (1997) as a basically cognitive measure of interpersonal competence. Thus, the first step is to see how each adolescent understands what groups exist in their class, who belongs to each group, and how they describe the relationships between the groups. The next step is to look for each interviewee's *personal meaning* of peer relationships. Here I examine what belonging to a popular or non–popular group means for each person. The cross–case and cross–gender discussion within the categories of *understanding* and *personal meaning* of peer group relationships follows the case–studies of individual subjects.

Ben

To the eye of an observer in a classroom Ben appears as

"A small Jewish boy with fair skin and long brown hair that falls around his cheeks. He is extremely bright, very outgoing in class, and seems respected and well liked by the other students. Ben is the most vocal boy in the class and often calls his answers out without raising his hand. He sometimes acts quite goofy and is not shy about asserting his opinion , even if it's different from everyone else in the class including the teacher (interviewer's notes)".

Ben's understanding of the groups

In his interview Ben talks about several groups in the grade:

> In the eighth grade, we have three groups of girls and the four groups of boys. Three groups of girls– the first group is Sara, Jenny and Ellen, etc.,–generally middle class or high middle class. Very into–teenage girls at this point are very interested in clothes and hair, etc., and that's them. And other girls – two other girls groups are–one group of basically black, Latino and Asian girls, who are generally from the inner city and projects, rap culture, and then the third group is Julia, Susan, Mary, who are kind of interested in clothes and hair, but they're also a bit– also interested in humanities and the arts, so they make up the eccentric girl group. And then the boys group–there's really only two– one solid group is basically just black and mixed kids who come from the projects and inner city, also rap culture. And the rest of us just kind of –we really have just three or four person–we don't really have groups, and that's what I'm in...

Ben's perception of what groups exist in the grade and how the groups are formed is quite complex. In his description he classifies groups by the *socio–economic status, ethnicity* and *common activities* of those within each group. He also ascribes some culture to each group and names them: 'very into teenage girls', 'rap culture' girls, 'eccentric group', 'rap culture' boys, and the last group, where he belongs goes unnamed.

In the second interview Ben speaks about yet another four groups in the grade classifying them by *popularity*––these are 'cool' boys and girls, and 'reject' boys and girls. (It would be nice to know how the two classifications of groups are related, i.e. which 'culture' in Ben's definition relates to each popularity status). Ben also notices that the division between the groups is not that clear, since there are changes in the relationships between the leaders.

> There is four main groups, Junior, Louise, Sara and Jonas being the leaders of the cool kids in a grade, and there is boys reject group and girls reject group, but lines between all the groups becoming blurred. The lines that held Sara's friends (B. also calls them the "in"group) and Joanne's friends hard is no longer there, because Sara's friends used to hang out with Jonas' friends but they don't so they hang out with Joanne's and it seems like we've (the reject boys) been spending more time with the Sara's group.

Later in that interview Ben suggests that 'cool' girls Sara and Louise are real leaders of the grade. As we'll see, Marty and Robert support him in this opinion, also naming these girls as leaders, and talking about boys 'sweating' them (i.e. following their opinions).

What does being/not being in a peer group personally mean for Ben?

In the first interview Ben reveals that he generally does not like the students in his grade. He believes that he is smarter than many of his peers, he is actually bored by them, and does not want to accept the norms of the 'in–group' peer culture. Ben also perceives himself as isolated, and says "I've always kind of been alienated from the other students", with the explanation that he is a different, special person, who is more thoughtful and more sophisticated than others. Ben clearly sees himself in opposition to the peer group. For him, there is 'me'–Ben and 'them'–other boys with whom he cannot be friends:

> I don't really have any friends right now, but you can't be yourself with my friends because it's always a lose–lose situation..., like if you say nothing in class they label you as stupid, but if you say something half intelligent they label you as nerdy, so it's really hard now. To fit with group of boys here you have to give up sensitivity and all your intellectual interests.

Ben's complaint about the 'always a lose–lose situation', and the boys' group that requires one to give up his sensitivity connects to our knowledge of adolescent boys' peer culture, with its cult of toughness and the unspoken rules of not revealing feelings (Pollack, 1999). Indeed, for a cerebral, sensitive, and physically small boy like Ben, being with more 'cool' and 'masculine' boys may be quite challenging. From the other

parts of this interview I learned that the amount of the felt pressure and loneliness for him was so great that Ben even felt suicidal that year.

Yet, facing a dilemma of 'you can't be yourself with my friends', Ben chooses not to blend with a group, but be himself and give up having friends. In the interview he states that he does not have any friends in the grade, and also declares "I don't really care about fitting in anymore." While this claim sounds somewhat like adolescent bravado, it is interesting to notice Ben's choice of independence in this case, which I will compare later with two other boys, who are also individualistically inclined, and with the girls.

Marty

An interviewer described Marty as a

> "Fairly dark–skinned African boy of average height who wears his hair closely cropped. He recently moved to the US from Canada. Prior to living in Canada, Marty lived in Botswana and Nigeria where he was born. He is a very good–natured boy who comes across as quiet, happy and gentle and who speaks with a bit of an accent. Though he seems quite engaged, he is very quiet in class and does not raise his hand. Although he has been here only for four months, he seems to have built some good friendships with some of the boys and girls in his grade, many of the students I have interviewed refer to Marty as their friend (interviewer's notes)."

<u>Marty's understanding of the groups</u>

Marty easily identifies several different groups in a grade. While Marty speaks in terms of popularity, naming groups 'cool' or 'just cool', it is clear from his description that he sees the difference between people in these groups not in their being liked by others, but in *the way they act* – what they do and how they behave. In this frame of reference he sees four different styles of acting in their class:

> I Like there are these boys that, I don't know how you'd describe them. I can't–like, my opinion, think they're like sort of weird (1). And then there's these girls that are sort of, like, the suck–up girls. And then, like, like real suck–ups (2). And then there are, I guess, like cool kids who, like sort of go too far (3), and the other half is the cool kids that are just cool, they're like just kind of cool (4).

The first group of 'weird' boys in Marty's description are those who study too much, or are too concerned about their school performance; "Students like Fred –he's always, like, so worried about what he gets in subjects.., the way he acts, he's too extreme about it." Clearly Marty does not have much respect for this group, probably because the mainstream peer culture represented by 'cool' students does not consider good grades (or even efforts to get them) as 'cool'.

The second group of 'suck–up' girls is close to the 'weird' boys in that it also consists of students who are concerned about grades, but even worse than 'weird' boys, since the girls try to befriend the teachers. Marty explicitly says that he will not associate himself with a group like that.

The third group is a group of cool students who 'go too far'. In his description of 'going too far', Marty talks about Louise (the new leader in the grade) who is "doing stuff, smoking sometimes and getting other students involved with that." Again we see that Marty consistently uses behavior, or activities as a classification tool to define a group.

Finally the group where he seems to belong is 'just cool' students. Marty does not talk about what 'just cool' students do, or how they act, but it is clear from the context that these are the students who are not very concerned about studying, but also do not engage in risky behaviors. Marty says "I think I'm in the cool group, but not too far, because like I have lots of friends and stuff", which means that he also considers having friends as a sign of his being in a cool group.

What does being in a group personally mean for Marty?

When asked about what matters to him most at school Marty says: "At school, I worry about where I stand with a person, cuz, like, I don't wanna be looked down on, or looked too high on, I just wanna be, like, in between." This phrase nicely supports Tannen's (1991) observation that boys are very sensitive to status and asymmetry in relationships, and it also very explicitly demonstrates Marty's purposes. He consciously does not want to associate himself with any marginal group. Marty wants to be accepted by the socially 'middle' group, and possibly avoid critical judgments of any sort. He also seems to feel comfortable in the circle of friends who are just like him –not too good to be envied, not too bad to be punished. As Marty himself admits: "We sort of go with students who don't usually break the rules." Choosing between the groups of peers, he looks for both friendships and for styles of behavior he deems appropriate.

When interviewer asks Marty whether people can keep their individuality and still be part of a group, Marty says:

> Um, I can't really say. Because, like, I'm not sure if they are being themselves or not. Like some students act like if they're faking it, I guess, like they're too hyper sometimes. [Do you feel like you have to give up things in order to be part of the group that you are in?] –No. I wouldn't give up anything.

It is interesting to note that Marty initially does not understand the question as a problem. While he knows that some students act differently sometimes, he does not seem to connect their behavior with demands of a group, as if he would be unaware of it. Moreover, pushed further by the next question of the interviewer, Marty gives a simple answer favoring individuality, "I wouldn't give up anything" to fit in, but he still does not say anything about the reality of the group peer pressure for him. It is hard to understand whether Marty indeed does not feel the peer pressure (which is unlikely), or if he is trying to hide any social/personal problems from the interviewer, or even from himself.

Yet, when the question of 'whether in your group you can be an individual and still be part of a group' is repeated, Marty shows more understanding and finally shares his perception of a problem:

> Yeah, I think so. Like, like in our group no one really cares like why did you do that? [And in some groups, do you think people can't be that way?]– Yeah, like especially in the girls group. Like, they act different...well, when they are with the group they are being themselves–um, but when the leader comes, they are not.[So, do you think it's important to be an individual while you're in a group?]– Yeah, because that's what makes a group, like the group is a group because of like your input into it. Like, if you don't put anything into it, you like don't belong to the group.

Now one can see that Marty's response 'I wouldn't give up anything' meant more than it seemed, he does indeed seem to believe that it's important to be an individual and that 'that's what makes a group'. Marty perceives a group as a collective of separate individuals, not as a coherent societal organism that demands one to belong and follow its rules. Yet, he also knows that unlike his boys' group, the girls' groups are different, and the girls sometimes cannot be themselves in their groups. Being a good observer, Marty notices what seems to be a very important difference between boys' and girls' constructions of a peer group, namely that the dilemma of remaining oneself and still

being in the group is more salient for the girls. I'll return to and illustrate this point later, when I consider girls from my sample.

Robert

The interviewer describes Robert as

> " Half Puerto Rican and half White. He has chin length brown hair parted in the middle, wears an earring in one ear and usually comes to school in baggy clothes. Robert is proud to live in the "projects" with his mother and brother. He likes being part of the culture of his neighborhood and considers himself a "ghetto" child. Robert does not participate in class discussions nor does he complete his homework assignments (interviewer's notes)."

Robert's understanding of peer groups

The first response that Robert has to the question about groups is that "there are no real groups, it's just like who you hang around with." Later he elaborates, that most of the people he hangs out with live around where he lives, and also that sometimes there are students in the school with whom he wouldn't hang out:

> Well, um, well we have like terms, like I don't know. Like the people I hang around with–
> you're like a getto child. It's slang. Or a rich prep. And I'm more like a getto child, so I don't hang around with like rich people cause they're like preppy and I do stuff that they wouldn't.

Thus, Robert defines two adolescent groups in the school (and beyond) which differ remarkably in their *socio–economic status* and the *style of behavior*:

> We made that up–getto. Cause we think we are a getto, but I don't think we really are, but um like we dress different then like rich people. We say rich preps, we wear baggy pants. Well, um, most of the time, like, we listen to like ah RAP, R&B. I'm wearing a beeper or something like that. Most of the people where I live have beepers, some cellular phones. Most, like, have pride in their stereos. Like their car stereos. Well, not to be like a drug deal kind of like look. It's just, it's just what people consider cool and stylish. We're like more in tune or in style and they're (preps) not. So... I hang around like um, like ah teen centers and like people and things are provided for the youth. And preps like we see hanging around at country clubs. Like restaurants and we just hang around at like pizza places or so that's basically how it is.

Robert's general understanding is that these two groups are very different by what they do, how they look and where they socialize. Asked a formal question about definition for prep or preppy Robert says: " Where they hang out. How they act. How they talk." Similar to Marty, Robert defines a person belonging to one or the other group by his/her style of behavior.

The other classification of groups given by Robert also involves *type of behavior* and *activity*–smarts/nerds (involved with studying) or athletes (involved with sports):

> In school, also we have, um, people that are smart, uh, like what music they listen to, if they're athletic. Like everyone says I'm smart, but I don't think it. I think I'm athletic. Well, I'm in a smart class. Mrs. G's class. And, most of my friends aren't. And the smart students are, if you're smart , you're just a nerd. You're geeks. Whatever, I'm not considered that.

Robert again distinguishes between the two different groups and describes them as alternative to each other– you're either smart or athletic, and he seems to be confused himself by his own belonging to both camps.

What does belonging to a group personally mean to Robert?

It is clear from the interviews that Robert claims that he belongs to the 'ghetto' group, and to the group of athletes. In several places he says: "I do stuff that they (preps) wouldn't", " I'd rather be ghetto than prep, cause prep is kinda like, not–not my style", "it is not a challenge to fight with preps, they're small people". Indeed he seems not to have much respect towards the 'rich preps' group, as well as towards the group of 'nerds': "If you're smart, you're just a nerd. You're geeks. Whatever, I'm not considered that." I get the impression that Robert really feels that images of a 'ghetto' child and 'athlete' fit his personality and social background (what he calls "my style") better than 'rich prep' or 'nerd', so he definitely wants to belong to this camp.

At the same time, in reality, Robert has some associations with groups of 'preps' and 'nerds'. He admits that "some of the preps are my friends" and even that "most of my friends at school are like preps, cause like there's no one else comes here", and later he says; " It doesn't really matter if you integrate with preps." Robert also talks about being in a smart class, but immediately claims that he is not smart and he is not considered a nerd. Having friendly connections with 'preps' and 'nerds' and being a potentially good student, Robert seems to be under strong pressure of the primary 'ghetto' culture within which he lives and develops. Perhaps he is afraid of criticism from his 'ghetto' friends and therefore he is trying to convince himself and the listener that, in any case, he is not smart and he is not hanging out with 'preps'.

Although Robert clearly feels a pressure to conform to the 'ghetto' image of his peer group, he is not too concerned about it. He states that some students in his group do not accept "integrating", and sometimes they give students who travel between both groups a hard time, saying "Get out, ghetto kid want–to–be prep." Yet Robert states: "I don't, I don't really care if they do call me that, cause it doesn't really matter." Even though Robert is aware of the pressure from his 'ghetto' group not to hang out with 'preps', this peer pressure is not enough for Robert to stop him from being friends with some of the 'preps', and with whoever he wants to befriend.

Like Marty, when asked about how to keep one's individuality and still be part of a group, Robert also firmly responds that it's important to keep identity and not to give up things to fit in:

> Yeah (I think it's important to be an individual), cause you outgrow your friends, and once they move on, you have to stick out as an individual. And make new friends, keep your identity, base your friends on your identity, and stuff like that.

It is important to notice that Robert thinks of basing his friends on his identity, in contrast to the girls in my sample, who, as discussed below, talk more about changing themselves to keep their friendships.

Abby

> "Abby is a tall, blond Caucasian girl who wears braces and speaks very quickly, usually slurring her words. She describes herself as coming from mixed European ancestry. She comes across as very bright and is easily engaged in class discussions. She is a good student who pays close attention in class and often asks very thoughtful and important questions. She describes herself as part of the 'popular' group of girls and it is clear that she is well liked (interviewer's notes)."

Abby's understanding of the groups

In the interview Abby is very willing to talk about her friends, groups and relationships. Asked to describe groups in the grade, she indicates that there are two groups of girls. The difference between these two groups, according to Abby, is mainly in their *popularity*.

> There's sort of like the main--my friends and I are sort of like the main clique--we're sort of like accepted. And there's another group of girls who hang out together, but they're not as popular -- I don't like using this word, but I guess that's the truth, that, like, they really aren't...I don't know what it is that makes us the popular group or whatever, it just sort of seems that we are. [SO, THERE'S TWO GROUPS. AND IS THAT JUST FOR GIRLS? OR IS THAT BOYS AND GIRLS?] I guess there are , like, girls in our group and then there are boys that we hang out with and stuff, and , like, we go to parties with, and there are them, and there aren't really any boys that hang out with them, I don't think.

Describing the differences between the 'popular' and the 'unpopular' groups, Abby talks about popularity of the girls among all students in a grade, boys and girls. Yet it is interesting to note that 'popular' girls have boys coming to their parties, while 'unpopular' girls don't, which supports Maccoby's (1998) observation that general

popularity of the 'popular' girls in a grade is connected to their success and popularity with the boys.

The boys, in Abby's opinion, hang out all in one large group which is more homogeneous in a sense that boys care less about keeping the clique's boundaries and are more free than girls to chose their friends as they like. Similar to Marty, Abby observes that girls are influenced by their peer groups to a greater extent than boys:

> Boys are, like, a lot less clique–y than girls are. They'll hang out with everybody and, like, I guess there are eight kids who are, we hang out with them a lot. And there are other people who, like, almost all the boys, like when we have parties, they're invited, and , all the boys are sort of thought of , like, in the group. Like there are some who are sort of more central to it, or whatever. But boys don't really care as much who they hang out with or what people think of them as girls do, they're a lot more willing to hang out with who they want to than girls are.

What does being in the peer group personally mean for Abby?

Abby admits that she personally feels a strong influence of her 'popular' group and that, while she is in a group, being herself and doing as she likes is not always an option.

> I mean, there are some things, like, you can't do, or, like, you have to do in that kind of group.... Like, people might not like someone, and you might like them, but you might not be willing to say, "Oh, no, that's not true, I like them." You might just go along with it or, like, not say anything at all, just, cuz you know there might be a big fight, and you just might decide you don't want to get into it that much...

Abby feels the group pressure not only in the social realm, but also she feels how her friends influence her doing well in school:

> And, like, grades–wise... there are a lot of boundaries, like you can be smart, but you can't be too smart to be in a group or whatever. When I do well on a test, I don't like go around advertising that I did well in it. I don't ask other people what they got on it, because I don't want people to know what I did.

Obviously, there are often situations when Abby feels that to fit in the group she has to hide what she thinks or what she does, even if this is doing well in school. But why,

afterall, is Abby so concerned about fitting in? Why couldn't she behave like Ben, who, in the situation of 'you can't be yourself with my friends', chose not to have friends in the school? Of course to answer this question in full one would have to make complex analyses of Ben's and Abby's personalities in the whole context of their lives. Yet, based on relational theory alone we could speculate that because she is an adolescent girl, Abby's friendships might have more emotional significance for her than for a boy of her age. The very idea of the relational self or 'being–in–relation' suggests that girls may be less willing (or even less able) to break off uneasy relationships, because these relationships constitute part of their sense of self. Thus, the fear of being rejected by her friends and staying alone could be felt stronger and create more profound anxiety for Abby than for Ben. In Abby's description one can sense how frightened she is by the prospect of her friends disliking her and having the kind of experience like Liz had (the girl who was ostracized by other girls in 'popular' group).

> They (the group) might get, like, –they start to be like– "Oh, she's so annoying, she, like, never, she doesn't like me". I think it sort of like the more people talk about– if one person says something and she's mad at me, I think that might get like – sort of like chain reaction, like one person says this and so does the other and then the other. [LIKE WHAT HAPPENED TO LIZ?] Yeah... I'm sure she felt horrible...I don't think she'll ever get over it.

In contrast to Robert, who tries to ignore what other boys tell him about his traveling between the groups, Abby cares a lot about what other girls have to say about her. It is really important to her to know that she is liked and accepted by the group. Being scared of losing the acceptance of her group, Abby becomes a classic illustration for Gilligan's theory of young girls suppressing and losing their voice for the sake of relationships (1982). Abby reveals how she doesn't want to say what she thinks, "It's not good to keep things to yourself, but I think it might change our relationship, and I don't know if I want

to have it be changed." Abby also describes her group as having fewer and fewer open conflicts:

> Over the years we used to have them a lot, like conflicts, we'd split up into two groups and get really mad at each other. But I noticed that– I don't know if people actually agree more, if they just, like– no one's saying what they think as much anymore. I think it's probably a more likely explanation, but I think, you know, people get into fights, but we don't really acknowledge it now,..you know, you forget about it.

In this description we can observe the progression of 'saving the relationships' mode of thinking in the girls' group, just as it was found in Brown's et al. (1992) study of school girls, who with the onset of adolescence learned to share less and less of what they really think. From Abby's words we also see how the progression of 'saving relationships' behavior leads to the tendency of adolescent girls to avoid conflicts, the tendency which was also described earlier in the literature review (Thorne& Luria, 1986).

Sara

> "Sara is a slim Caucasian girl with blond hair and big blue eyes whose father is an Australian and whose mother is American. (She describes the mix as a "culture clash".) Sara did not strike me as a major personality in the class (she rarely ever speaks or participates), but most of the students named her as a leader or a member of the 'popular' group. While she describes herself as having a lot of friends, she says she is "good at making enemies, too". Often, when Sara is bothered by another student, her friends come to her rescue by getting back at that person. She comes across as sweet, earnest and sincere."(Interviewer's notes).

Sara's understanding of the groups

When posed with a question about what kinds of groups exist in the grade Sara seems to be confused or hesitant to name the groups, as she knows them.

> I don't really know how to describe them. It's just, basic, – there's two kind of big groups of boys, and one group of seventh and eighth grade boys they're all just hanging out together. (The seventh and eighth grade boys), and there's girls with them, too, but they're all black students. That's just what I noticed. And the groups, kind of aside from the seventh and eighth grade ... I can't really describe it. It's just like, it's the same with the girls. There's two different– it's not like 'cool' people and the 'not cool' people. It's just different people hanging out with different people.

Paying attention to the ethnicity of students and seeing groups as divided racially, Sara also perceives the groups in terms of their 'coolness' or *popularity*. Even though she says 'it's not like the cool people and the not cool people', from this phrase and from the context of their talk with Interviewer, it feels like this *is* actually what Sara meant. Being one of the leaders of 'popular' students, Sara is perfectly aware of her being in the 'cool' group, but she is very cautious not to create the wrong impression on the interviewer and prefers to talk about 'just different'. We'll also see this pattern in Susan's description of groups, where she also tries to be modest and polite by avoiding saying that other girls are less popular.

Later, when Sara elaborates how the groups of boys are different she says "One group of boys listen to rap and dress like baggy clothes and everything.., another group is kind of jeans and shirt, or whatever, like in terms of dressing, and they do their homework and everything." In addition to popularity, the way students dress, what they listen to and their attitude to school are the categories Sara uses to describe the groups. Like all three boys in my sample, Sara also notices that boys who hang out together in each group have common styles, interests and activities. Yet when Sara uses the same categories to describe her own group she says, "it's kind of mixed in terms of how we dress and music and, like, schoolwork and things." What, in Sara's opinion, really divides the girls in her group from girls in the other group is the relational conflict, which occurred a year ago and lasted through the year when the interview was conducted:

girl I have a few people that don't like me and I don't like them, but, it's just kind of divided, and I don't know why but it is. It's kind of– last year there was a big fight between me and another (Liz)..., and then the group that I hang out with, she started being cold to them so they didn't like her anymore, so she had to make friends with the other group. So, that kind of divided the grade, and it's kind of been like that ever since.

So, as I understand Sara's perspective, the two groups of girls are divided on the basis of a critical incident, which happened between the girls. It is fascinating to think that it is not the looks, grades, or interests, but the very dynamic of intense relationships between the girls that may segregate girls into groups, and define the memberships in the popular group. The girl, like Liz, who does not "survive" the rules of friendships in the popular group is ostracized and goes to the less popular one. If this is a common pattern working in girls' groups, then the 'popular' group should always consist of the girls who are most socially competent, which in turn also makes sense as a common definition of popularity. At the same time, it is also possible that the 'popular' girls are just more ready to conform to the friendship rules than the girls who are less liked by others.

What does being in the peer group personally mean for Sara?

Similar to Abby, Sara admits that her friends influence her in many ways, including the way she looks, the music she chooses to listen to, and the grades she gets. Sara also reveals that when she gets an 'A' she is sometimes embarrassed in the company of her friends who don't do as well in school. Indeed, lately her grades have gone down, perhaps as a result of these peer relationships.

Like Abby, Sara cares a lot about what other students think about her. Asked about the things that matter most to her, she says: "The way people see me, like what people think of me, which is really bad but that's how I feel." Sara is so concerned and anxious about others liking her that she sometimes believes that everybody hates her: "I think it just seems to me sometimes like everybody hates me, and I know that's not true.

It just seems like it. I don't know. I just always seem to feel like I'm not wanted or whatever."

This degree of anxiety and fear of being rejected by others is especially surprising when we remember that Sara is one of the most popular students, a leader in the grade. In fact, many of the interviewed students said that they liked her. Nevertheless, Sara is extremely concerned about others' judgments of her, and does not feel like she can freely decide what to do or what to say in the company of her friends. Indeed, she gives a firm 'no' when asked whether people can keep their individuality and still be part of a group:

> No, I don't think so. Some people can. It's hard for me. I'm influenced by people a lot, but I also notice that a lot of the new students who come kind of change drastically with the way that they dress and what they, like listen to...you definitely change to fit in with who you're with, and sometimes you don't even fit in, you just try to.[AND WHY DO YOU THINK PEOPLE TRY SO HARD?]Well, no one wants to not have friends. I mean, that's a given, and it's kind of you want people to respect you, and to be popular, and stuff like that, I guess.

So, Sara perceives her peers in general as needing to be in the group. She is also aware of herself being influenced by her group. Could it be that this deep understanding of the necessity of being with others, and the anxious concern for her own image in the group are the keys to Sara's success in becoming the girls' leader?

In any case, it is striking to see how, in contrast to all three boys Abby and Sara both deny the possibility of being oneself while belonging to the group. Now let's see how this relational dilemma is being solved by Susan.

Susan

> "Susan is a Chinese–American girl with long black hair and thick glasses, who describes herself as a good student who "usually gets A's". Although she is very quiet and rarely raises her hand in class, and seems that the other students and Pat (the teacher) are impressed by her work. Pat often asks Susan to help her collect

assignments or do other favors. Susan considers herself to be part of the "middle" group at school– not popular or in the "low" group." (From interviewer's notes)

Susan's understanding of the groups

As interviewer noticed, Susan considers herself as belonging to the 'middle' group in the grade. Like Abby and Sara, Susan also classifies groups primarily by their *popularity*:

> Well, um, like our group thinks of this other group that's, like, we think that they're really popular, and they're the popular group... And, if they though of us, they would think, like, "that low group." But if, well, I don't, I don't want to say this, but, like, some people are , like, lower than us.[WHEN YOU SAY LOWER WHAT DO YOU MEAN?] Like, um, they're like not as popular, I guess. I feel like I'm being mean if I say that. Because I think everyone, it doesn't matter if you're popular or not, it's just like, what's inside.

It is interesting to see how Susan explains the higher status of the 'popular' group and the lower position of the least popular group. Susan believes that people in the 'popular' group would not want to hang out with her, because they are all rich and they "live in mansions and everything." So she seems to ascribe their popularity to their socio–economical status. Yet, in contrast to Ben and Robert, who see the economy–based division of students in the school as primary, Susan is firstly concerned about popularity. The wealthy background of other students seem to catch her attention only as much as it contributes to their being popular, liked by others.

At the same time, when Susan talks about the 'lower' group she does not suggest that people in that group are not popular because they are lower socio–economic class than her group. This time she focuses on the behavior of the students from the 'unpopular' group as a reason not to hang out with them:

> The less popular group is the group that are like really, really different. They have things that are, like, um, kind of weird about them...they're looked down on because they're like considered as like unnormal, abnormal or something.[AND, DO YOU THINK THAT THEY ARE ABNORMAL?] Well, I think um, no one's perfect, but they're like, they don't try to be like, well, I don't know how to say this, but I think it's because they don't work um, as hard as, like,

> the other people (in school). And, they like, I don't know how, it's like they're different and we don't want to hang out with them, it's just how we feel.

For Susan it is really important that the students from the 'lower' group don't work in school as hard as she does, since she identifies herself with the group of girls who 'like to work for our future'. Because they are not willing to study and have a different behavioral style ("they're weird") Susan is not friends with the 'lower' group and also indicates that there is collective feeling in Susan's group that "*we* don't want to hang out with them."

What does being in the peer group personally mean for Susan?

In general, Susan seems to be very involved in the social life of her group and feels comfortable with her friends. She says that she likes to hang out with this group, because "the things that we work for are similar", and there are also other interests like going to movies and shopping that bring Susan and her friends together. Asked whether she has to give things up to be part of the group, she says: "No, I'm comfortable with them...But, I don't, don't really talk about, like, my personal things with them, but more like, I don't do anything different."

Thus, Susan does not feel like there is a contradiction between being herself and belonging to the group. At the same time, she does not feel safe enough to discuss her "personal things" with her friends, which leads me to think that her involvement in the group is not very deep. She also admits that she does not have a "best personal friend" among people in this group. Probably, Susan is just not close enough with other girls in her group to feel the dilemma of giving up her individuality, which stands out so clearly

for Sara and Abby. However, like other girls she covers up her personal feelings and goes along with the group by not doing "anything different".

Another pattern in relationships with peers, which makes Susan similar to other girls, is her tendency to avoid relational conflicts. Asked how she typically acts when there is a conflict in her group, Susan says: " I don't go any sides because that might even break the group even more." Like Abby, who is afraid to cause tension in relationships by saying what she really thinks, Susan is also concerned about saving the group more than about actually solving the conflict.

Cross–Case Discussion and Conclusion

In my sample, boys and girls have clearly demonstrated different patterns in their perceptions of peer relationships in the groups. First, let us compare students in their understanding of what groups exist in the grade. When describing groups, Ben and Robert both used *socioeconomic status* to define the groups. For Robert being a rich 'prep' or 'ghetto' child was a basic distinction. For Ben, who also used other classifications– such as ethnicity, activities and popularity, SES was the defining classification of students into groups. Also, in their discussion of groups Ben, Marty and Robert consistently described different groups by *interests or activities* accepted in a group. Ben talked about girls who are interested in clothes and hair, and girls who are interested in humanities. Marty talked about 'weird boys' and 'suck– up' girls who study too much and befriend the teachers, and the ' cool students who go too far' who engage in risky behaviors like drugs. Robert talked about 'ghetto' and 'preps' doing different kinds of things and hanging around in different places, and about 'smarts' in math and 'athletes' in sports. In all cases, boys tended to describe common interests or activities of

different groups. This tendency of Ben, Marty and Robert to be focused on interests and activities is in line with well-known experiential finding that boys' and men's friendships are based on doing things together (Caldwell&Peplau, 1982). At the same time, the girls understood differences between the groups primarily in terms of *popularity*. While all three girls seem to be aware of different styles, activities and economic status of students in popular or less popular groups, popularity is always the main category in their perceptions of the groups. It is also clear that Abby, Sara and Susan are deeply concerned about their own popularity, both as individuals and as a group where they belong. This result of my study is also not surprising, as the previous research had shown that girls are concerned with popularity to a much greater degree than are boys (Eder &Hullinan, 1978). Yet, it is important to note that the very classifications of the groups for girls and boys in my sample were different.

Now let us compare Ben, Robert and Marty with the girls in terms of personal meanings of being in a peer group. Asked about the dilemma of keeping one's individuality and still being part of a group all three boys argue in favor of individuality. Ben decides to quit the peer group rather than to fit in. "I wouldn't give up anything (to fit in)"- says Marty. "You outgrow your friends, and once they move on, you have to stick out as an individual"-says Robert. While Ben is aware that to be with his friends he would have to give up his sensitivity and intellectual interests, and chooses not to do so, Marty and Robert do not even perceive this as a problem. They don't feel like they have to 'sacrifice' any parts of themselves to be part of their groups. It might be interesting to think more about why Robert and Marty are not aware of the tensio n between being oneself and fitting into the group. I wonder if the typical adolescent boys' behavior of presenting oneself as not feeling pains and not having troubles (Kindlon and Thompson,

1998, Pollack, 1999) comes to play here. Is it possible that the boys know about this tension, but are not ready to talk about it? Or do they simply care less than girls about the group's judgments and also know that other boys care less as well? These questions should be addressed in future research. I would suggest that the last hypothesis is more plausible, since boys themselves, as well as girls, talk about boys being more able to ignore the opinions of their groups.

The girls in my sample are much more concerned about fitting into their group than boys. They are also more aware that to fit in they have to hide or 'lose' part of their selves. Abby and Sara openly admit that they are influenced a lot by their group in terms of what they say in the group and how they behave in general. Susan is less aware of the conflict between being herself and still being a member of the group, yet she also admits that when being with her friends she does not 'go any sides' in the conflict and 'does not do anything different'. In this respect, my pilot study seems to support the previous research, particularly findings of Gilligan that adolescent girls "lose their voices for the sake of relationships" (1982) and Aapola's finding that balancing of closeness and independence is a central tension in adolescent girls' friendships (Griffits, 1995).

I also noticed that boys and girls were aware of the different social cultures of their peer groups. Abby mentions that "boys don't really care as much who they hang out with or what people think of them as girls do." Marty also believes that in the girls' groups when the leader comes, the girls are not themselves. This observation can also be connected to the previous study of Bukowski and Kramer who found that adolescents are aware of gender differences in their styles of friendships (1986).

To summarize this work, the literature review and the pilot study suggest that adolescent boys and girls have different perceptions of the peer groups. While for boys

the important part of being in the peer group is what they do together and what is their status in activities, for girls it seems to be more important how popular or well liked they are by others in the group. Also, boys perceive the group more as a collective of independent individuals, where each member of the group does not necessarily have to follow the opinions of the group. At the same time, the girls seem to view a peer group as more demanding on their personalities. They feel that they have to be like others, otherwise they will not be liked and will be excluded from the group. Girls feel more connected to and more dependent on their group than boys, which comes back to their experiencing 'relational crises', when being with others becomes more important than being oneself. In addition, it is also important to remember that, as relational theory suggests, the very construct of the 'independent self' for girls is questionable.

To further explore the phenomenon of adolescent girls and boys having different perceptions of relationships in peer groups, more research should be done in this area. Particularly, I would argue for the importance of qualitative research. We need to continue this investigation of individual perceptions, since it is in listening to the words of adolescents themselves, that psychologists and educators can go deep enough in their understanding of adolescent problems to construct meaningful research and to be helpful in the real world of school.

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